

FIRST PETER

Lesson 16

Attitudes in Suffering

1 Peter 3:13-18a

What does the Bible mean when it says “*Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials?*” (James 1:2). When suffering comes into our lives, are we to go around saying, “I’m so happy! Isn’t it wonderful to suffer! Isn’t it the most exciting thing in the world to be suffering!” Absolutely not. Suffering is painful. The text says we are to have joy—an inner emotion. We are to have this inner joy in the midst of external suffering.

Experiencing joy in the midst of suffering is directly related to having a positive mental attitude about Christ and His sovereign purposes for us in suffering. There are certain things we must know about what suffering does for us before we can “*rejoice always*” (1 Thess. 5:16). First Peter 3:13-18a gives us some of these principles whereby we can have a divine viewpoint towards suffering.

In 3:13 Peter begins a new section of his epistle and it continues on through 5:11. Here Peter deals with the Christian’s discipline in suffering when he is persecuted for righteousness’ sake or how we can live effectively as Christians when we are under the fire of suffering. We are given an introduction to the Christian’s discipline in suffering in which there are proper attitudes that all Christians are to cultivate when going through suffering of any kind, although in the context of the epistle the subject is social and physical suffering because of one’s stand for Jesus Christ in this sin-cursed world.

SUFFERING, WHILE NORMAL, IS NOT CONSTANT (3: 13)**“And . . .”**

The “and” tells us that what is about to be said is directly connected to something which has been previously said. In 1 Peter 3:10-11, Peter, quoting from Psalm 34, states that the Christian is to “love life and see good days” and is to do this by turning off an evil tongue, turning away from evil actions and turning towards peace. His point is that the godly life normally leads to a life of peace and prosperity, and there is no better way of life on this earth than to be a follower of Jesus Christ. It is the best life, the most exciting life and the most prosperous life.

“who is there to harm you if you prove zealous for what is good?”

The general rule is that if Christians live a good life, they will be responded to by the unsaved world by good and kind acts. The normal response to living a good life is to expect that people will respond to the Christian the same way the Christian responds to the unsaved. There are always some unsaved people who are so hardened that they treat all Christians with contempt and harshness. However, normally, if we do good to the unsaved world, if we turn the other cheek, if we reply with a soft answer, if we have a benevolent attitude, the unsaved will not harm us.

However, the Bible teaches that “*all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted*” (2 Tim. 3:12). We know that Christ was put to death for doing good; the Apostles were put to death for following Christ’s example; and multitudes of Christians have suffered persecution only because they desired to do good. Yet we know that this kind of suffering is not typical.

While it is true that the godly will suffer, this suffering is not the pattern of the Christian’s life. We should never expect suffering to be the normal return for doing good. Suffering may come as Christians seek to live godly lives which will convict the non-Christians, but we ought not to be waiting for persecution to come. We need to avoid any kind of persecution complex about our Christian lives. Martin Luther said, “Go on in faith and love; if the cross comes, take it; if it comes not, do not seek it.”

It should also be noted that suffering is not a constant activity. It comes in spurts, for there are many periods in our lives in which we are relatively free from external suffering, and it is during these times that we are to be learning doctrine from God’s inspired Word so that when it does come we will be able to stand up under it.

Even in church history, especially in the first three centuries of the church, there was not constant persecution; it was spasmodic. If there had been constant persecution, the church would have been wiped out. The general rule, then, is that when we do good to others we can expect good in return.

SUFFERING IS A BLESSING (3:14a)

“But even if you should suffer for the sake of righteousness”

The “if” in the Greek expresses a remote possibility; that is, suffering for good is possible but not probable. It is very rare that a Christian suffers for doing good. It happens but it is not the normal occurrence.

“you are blessed.”

If a Christian does suffer unjustly for righteousness’ sake, he is one who is blessed. Notice it says “blessed” not “happy.” We do not jump for joy when we are suffering. If we do, there is something wrong with us; we are not normal. “Blessed” does not mean to feel delighted but to be highly privileged. It is a blessed religious privilege to suffer for Christ because God has great lessons for us to learn through suffering.

Someone has said, “Jesus often spoke of Christianity as a banquet but He never said it would be a picnic.”

Suffering is not something terrible which should be avoided at all costs. No, suffering is a blessing because God uses it to accomplish spiritual results in our lives. If we try to avoid all suffering like the plague, then we are avoiding the work of God in our lives. We may ask God to remove suffering, but He may not do it because He has lessons He wants us to learn to bring us along into spiritual maturity.

“And because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet me—to keep me from exalting myself! Concerning this I entreated the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And He said to me, ‘My

grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.’ Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ’s sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor. 12:7-10).

Becoming a Christian does not mean that we will be set free from all suffering. In fact, becoming a Christian may mean we have more suffering. Never become a Christian because you think it will solve all your problems. It may solve some and create others, but God will use all your sufferings to bring about your progress in the Christian life. Remember, it is a privilege to suffer for Christ.

Chrysostom, an early church father, said this about the privilege of suffering:

“Should the empress determine to banish me, let her banish me; ‘The earth is the Lord’s and the fulness thereof.’ If she will cast me into the sea, let her cast me into the sea; I will remember Jonah. If she will throw me into a burning, fiery furnace, the three children were there before me. If she will throw me to the wild beasts, I will remember that Daniel was in the den of lions. If she will condemn me to be stoned, I will be the associate of Stephen, the proto-martyr. If she will have me beheaded, the Baptist has submitted to the same punishment. If she will take away my substance, ‘naked came I out of my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return to it.’”

SUFFERING MUST BE FACED WITH CHRIST AS LORD IN THE HEART (3:14-15a)

“AND DO NOT FEAR THEIR INTIMIDATION, AND DO NOT BE TROUBLED”

If the Christian is producing good works and is suffering for righteousness’ sake, he does not need to feel intimidated or agitated by those producing the suffering. If we are true Christians, we have no reason to be alarmed about anything that can happen to us. Why? Go back to 1 Peter 3:12 where it says, *“The eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous.”*

In suffering, God is our protector and He is able to vanquish all our foes, to uphold us in all of our trials, to conduct us through the valley of death, and to bring us to heaven. Whenever persecution comes or any kind of suffering, our natural response is to retreat, escape and back off. We begin to cower with fear. We want to get out of suffering. Yet, this may be the very thing which God will use to push us deeper into Christian maturity.

Remember, when the Lord Jesus was being tested, Satan took Him to a very high mountain and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And Satan said to Him, “All these things will I give You, if you fall down and worship me.” He was offering Christ the earthly kingdom without the Cross. He was saying that Christ could rule and reign over the world without dying on the Cross for sin so as to make the millennial kingdom possible. Satan was saying that if Christ would bow down and worship him, He could avoid suffering. This would have been an easy way out of suffering, but Christ submitted Himself to the will of the Father and said to Satan, *“You shall worship the Lord your God, and serve Him only” (Matt. 4:10).*

Peter is teaching us that when suffering comes, we almost always try to find some way out or some short cut that will make it easier. Satan is going to tempt us to run, to hide, to escape suffering so we will not reap the good consequence of that suffering—spiritual growth in Christ.

“but SANCTIFY Christ as Lord in your hearts”

The word “sanctify” means “to set apart” and was used in pagan Greek religions of the act of setting apart or consecrating a building as a temple, designating it as religious in character to be used for religious purposes. “Lord” is the title for Christ’s deity and “Christ” signifies “the Anointed One” or the Messiah.

Christ is to reign as God in our hearts which is the sanctuary of God in the New Testament. Christ is to be acknowledged as holy and worshipped in the heart. Christians are exhorted, whatever the circumstance, to enjoy living fellowship with Christ by realizing His indwelling presence and maintaining a heart of reverence for Him. When we are suffering, Christ is to reign as Lord in our hearts, which is the sanctuary or temple of God.

Worship is never connected with a place in the New Testament, nor is it connected with buildings or any visible objects. Worship is in “spirit and truth” (John 4:24). God is with His people, in their hearts and in their midst.

Do you, Christian, have a little sanctuary, a little chapel in your heart? Do you fellowship with Christ constantly, whether riding along in a car, walking down the street, in the shop, office or classroom? Do you make your heart a chapel where you can sanctify Christ as Lord in the midst of suffering? Christianity is fellowship with Christ at all times because He lives as Lord in the heart.

First Peter 3:14b-15a is a quote from Isaiah 8:12-13 which says, “*Neither fear their fear, nor be afraid. Sanctify the Lord of hosts himself; and let him be your fear, and let Him be your dread*” (KJV). This quotation is significant because at this time in his ministry, Isaiah was experiencing persecution for righteousness’ sake.

Isaiah prophesied to the nation of Judah when it was declining spiritually and morally. He began his ministry during the reign of King Uzziah, who was a good king, at least in the early years of his reign. In his latter years, Uzziah contracted leprosy, and so his son Ahaz became co-regent. Uzziah trusted in God but Ahaz trusted in man and made political alliances with the nation of Assyria to protect Judah.

In Isaiah 6, we are told that Isaiah saw a vision in the year King Uzziah died. He knew that the only thing that kept Ahaz from destroying the nation of Judah was the influence of his father Uzziah. Now that Uzziah was dead what would happen to Judah?

The Lord gave him a vision where he saw the Lord Jehovah sitting on a throne lofty and exalted. God wanted to assure Isaiah that even though the earthly king, Uzziah, had died, God had not died. The Governor of the universe, God Himself, was alive and well and was able to take care of Ahaz and Judah. Isaiah could rest in that truth and could go on ministering with assurance during the reign of Ahaz.

In Isaiah 7, Isaiah prophesied against Ahaz and told him that God was not pleased with the alliance with Assyria because Ahaz was trusting in human wisdom, human might and human ingenuity rather than in God. Ahaz rejected Isaiah’s counsel, and the people tried to convict the prophet of treason. God said to him, “*Neither fear their fear, nor be afraid. Sanctify the Lord of hosts himself.*” That is, Isaiah was to remember that God is Lord of the

universe. God was in control in the midst of his suffering. He was to give God the place of Lordship in his life that he occupies in the universe.

Now what the Apostle Peter does in 3:15 is transpose the name of Christ for Jehovah-God, because Jesus was the Lord who was high and lifted up in Isaiah's vision (John 12:37-41). Peter is saying that when suffering we are not to be intimidated or agitated but to let Christ rule in our hearts. He is Governor of the universe, King of the world. He is in control. This concept keeps the Christian from falling to pieces in suffering when everything around seems to be shaking apart. We have a Lord who is in control.

Furthermore, when we have obstacles, testings and trials in suffering and it feels like we are going to crack, the Lord says, "Don't get scared! Don't trust in human reason! Don't trust in man, but trust in Me; I have every situation under control."

In suffering, each Christian is to voluntarily place himself under the Lordship of Christ. Who is going to rule you when things get tough? Who will be your leader in times of suffering—Christ or man? Will you give Christ the right to rule as the ultimate authority in your life? This attitude alone will deliver you in the midst of suffering.

SUFFERING DONE WITH THE RIGHT ATTITUDE WILL OFTEN CREATE A WITNESSING OPPORTUNITY FOR CHRIST (3:15b)

“always being ready to make a defense to every one who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you”

When a Christian is being persecuted for good works, when he is suffering, an unbeliever may ask why he can take it so calmly and how he can have hope in Christ. The Christian's positive response to suffering will cause the unbeliever to ask certain questions because there will be a quality of life that he has never seen before.

When the non-Christian asks us about our hope in Christ and our confident assurance of heaven, we are to give an answer, a defense of our Christian faith to them. Whenever we are asked about the source of our power, we are to be ready, prepared. We are to not only give our testimony but also to show from the Bible why we are Christians. We should be thinking through our theology now, and this takes some mental effort. We are to always be ready to give an answer. We Christians must not only be ready, we should also be eager and willing to speak out concerning our hope in Christ and to share the basic elements of our faith.

We are to make a defense; that is, we are to give a reasonable, logical, intelligent answer, not an emotional response or a theological discourse, but an explanation of what Christ has done in our lives and why we have an assured hope of heaven. Often when we suffer for our testimony for Christ we get quiet rather than speak out because we are intimidated and we do not like to suffer. We try to melt into the group. We become like a chameleon who blends into the scenery and we keep quiet.

When things get tough, when we are asked about our faith, perhaps we say, "I'll just keep my witness to myself!" Peter says we are not to do that. We are under obligation to give a response.

Notice also that we are to make our defense to everyone; that is, we ought to be able to explain our faith to all kinds of unbelievers. Can we explain our faith to modernists, Mormons, Jehovah Witnesses, Unitarians or Roman Catholics? Can we answer the college professor as well as the college hippie? Every man means every man; all kinds of men.

When we witness we are to tell about our hope in Christ. This is an eschatological hope. It is the absolute confidence and assurance that we shall one day be with Jesus in heaven. Philosophers have tabbed this age as the age of despair, but we Christians do not despair; we have hope.

Our task, Christian, is to be a witness for Christ.

“And He said to them, ‘Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation’” (Mark 16:15).

“As Thou didst send Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world” (John 17:18).

“But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

We are to tell men about Christ. We are to defend our faith in Christ before the world. It is God’s task to win the lost, although we must be deeply involved in the reaching of men for Christ. *“I have become all things to all men, that I may by all means save some” (1 Cor. 9:22b).*

The Shorter Catechism says, “Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever.” That is a truth, but if this is our chief end, then our main goal must be to reach the lost world for Christ, and we must never relent in this task as long as we live.

It is interesting that we can talk to people about the weather, sports, politics, or our latest operation and do so with complete ease. Yet, when we begin to speak about Christ to men, our knees shake, we freeze up, and our voices squeak. We Christians have the most important message to tell this world: “Jesus Christ saves sinful men and gives them the hope of eternal life.”

“yet with gentleness and reverence”

When a Christian gives a defense, he is not to give a flippant answer, but it is to be done with gentleness and respect for the person to whom he is speaking. We do not need to be argumentative. We want to avoid being offensive. We can be so zealous for Christ in our witness that we turn people off. We can be nasty and give people the aroma of spiritual body odor rather than a sweet smelling savor of Christ. The way we present the gospel to people is important. We must do it respectfully, humbly and gently.

“And the Lord’s bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will” (2 Tim. 2-24-26).

As witnesses for Christ, we must respect the sensibilities of men. We are not necessarily to stop every person we meet and say, “Are you saved, brother?” Some people can do this, but most cannot. John Wesley tried to ask every man, “How is it with your soul

today?” In our witness, we are not to come on like a speeding train and trample all over other people’s personalities. We are to witness with gentleness and respect, but we are to witness!

SUFFERING DONE WITH THE RIGHT ATTITUDE WILL CONVICT THE UNSAVED 3:16)

“and keep a good conscience so that in the thing in which you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame.”

A Christian is to have a good conscience towards God and a good testimony before men. When persecuted for their faith, Christians will confound their opponents by their good lives and sweet testimony. When unbelievers see Christians operating on a supernatural principle by faith in the midst of suffering, then they will be attracted to Christ and will want to know the basis for this power. One who acknowledges the Lordship of Christ in the midst of suffering will bring conviction to the unsaved man who is in desperate need of Christ to help him deal with the crisis of life.

One of the basic reasons we Christians are often not effective witnesses is that our consciences condemn us. We are in sin or are indifferent to Christ and we know He is not working in us like He should. A Christian with a condemned conscience has a very difficult time telling others about the excitement of being a Christian. We are the most silent witnesses when we are not occupied with Christ in our experiences.

Whenever our conscience condemns us, we must face up to the sin that is plaguing us, confess it, turn from it, and move on for Christ or we will never be effective in reaching the lost for Christ. It is this kind of openness and honesty before God and men which will draw people to Christ, not perfection, but a good conscience.

SUFFERING IS PART OF THE WILL OF GOD (3: 17)

“For it is better, if God should will it so, that you suffer for doing what is right rather than for doing what is wrong.”

The probability that one will suffer for doing good is not great, but if a Christian does suffer for doing good, it is God’s will. It is always better that we suffer for good, not deserving it, than to suffer for bad, deserving it.

When we suffer and we cannot pinpoint a specific sin, then we can conclude that this suffering is God’s will and He has brought it either to glorify Himself or to cause us to grow in Christ. Often God wants us to learn to trust Him alone, and that can only be done as we suffer.

Yet, in our suffering we can claim the promises of God. Here are a few of them:

“Do not fear, for I am with you, do not anxiously look about you, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, surely I will help you, surely I will uphold you with My righteous right hand” (Isa. 41:10).

“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for Thou art with me.” (Psalm 23:4).

“The Lord is my light and my salvation; Whom shall I fear? The Lord is the defense of my life; Whom shall I dread?” (Psalm 27:1)

“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, and though the mountains slip into the heart of the sea; though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains quake at its swelling pride” (Psalm 46:1-3).

SUFFERING WAS EXPERIENCED BY CHRIST WHO IS OUR EXAMPLE (3: 18a)

“For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, in order that He might bring us to God.”

Peter turns these suffering Christians to the perfect example of suffering—the Lord Jesus Christ. When he says it is the will of God when we suffer unjustly, an objector might say, “Peter, you don’t know what you are talking about. You don’t know my world. I’ve found you have to stand up for your rights or you are really going to suffer. In my world, you have to claw and scratch. It is dog eat dog. You have to fight. To suffer unjustly is unnecessary and stupid!”

But Peter would reply, “Wait a minute! Look at Jesus, He suffered injustice, but He never griped, complained, cursed or retaliated in any way. He committed His life into His Heavenly Father’s hands and God took care of Him.” *“And while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously.” (1 Peter 2:23).*

Jesus Christ sets the example that the way to deal with unjust criticism and actions is to keep quiet and trust a sovereign God for a divine solution.

Why did Christ suffer? He suffered, the just One for unjust ones, that He might bring us Christians to God. Jesus suffered more injustice than any other person for the one purpose of bringing men to God. The principle is clear: we Christians are to follow the example of Christ and suffer unjustly also. Why? That we might bring men to God through our witness.

CONCLUSION

The basic question in the universe today is, “How can I get to God?” Christ bridged the gap between God and man because He was and is the God-Man, the only mediator between a holy God and sinful men. The Bible says, *“For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 2:5).* Christ died to reconcile men to God, to bring them to God.

Are you reconciled to God? Believe that Christ died for your sins and rose from the dead to be your Lord. Trust Christ, bow your will to Him and He will bring you to God.